Watercolor for Beginners

Source: http://www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/all-in-one-guide-to-watercolor-for-beginner

No medium can match the delicate luminosity of transparent watercolor. It has a freshness and immediacy that can't easily be duplicated with oil or acrylic. No wonder the medium is so popular! However, painting with watercolors can be difficult. It is a hard medium to master, largely because it can be unforgiving and unpredictable. Mistakes are difficult to correct, and its fluid nature makes it hard to control. Yet it's these very qualities that give the medium its undeniable charm. Learning to work with—and even exploit—the behavior of pigment-laden water on paper is a rewarding challenge.

Artists have used water-based paints for centuries, but not until the late 1700s, as paint- and paper-making technology improved, did a form of watercolor that we would recognize today appear. Watercolor is a simple medium, made with pigment and gum arabic, and is applied with a brush and water to white paper, resulting in a purity and clarity unmatched by other painting media. Despite, or perhaps because of, its simplicity, watercolor paints can be subtle or glowingly expressive. Enjoy reading through this all-in-one guide for how to paint with watercolor for beginners.

Learn to Watercolor Paint with These Brush Tips

Good brushes are indispensable watercolor supplies. For the neophyte, high-quality brushes are a great investment and will last a long time with proper care. Working with inadequate brushes is frustrating, while using good brushes makes learning new watercolor painting techniques much easier.

Good watercolor brushes are made with natural hair or synthetic fiber. The very best (and most expensive) natural-hair brushes are made with kolinsky sable. Red sable brushes aren't as expensive as kolinsky but are of excellent quality. Sable brushes have a spring that makes them very responsive to the artist's hand. Synthetic brushes today rival the quality of sable and are more durable, so they are a good value for the artist.

Brushes, from left to right: wash, large round, flat, small round, liner, medium round and hake

Brush Shapes

- **Round:** Its hairs form a round tip; these brushes are the most common and most useful because they can make lines as well as broad strokes. They're graded by size, Nos. 00000 to 24; a good basic selection of rounds would include Nos. 3, 5 and 12.
- **Flat:** The tip has a straight edge that produces an angular stroke. These are ideal for laying down large areas of even color and defining precise edges. Sizes are measured in inches along the flat edge; a good selection includes ½-inch, ¾-inch and 1-inch brushes.
- **Wash:** These large, flat brushes can hold a lot of paint, allowing the artist to lay large washes. A 1½-inch and a 3-inch are the most useful.
- **Liner:** A small round brush with a pointed tip is good for making fine, thin lines and for signing a finished painting; keep a No. 1 on hand.
- **Mop:** A large, round brush made with soft hairs can hold a lot of water when wet or soak up a lot of water when thirsty. A mop is useful for wetting large areas of paper or blotting or blending paint that is already applied. A No. 12 is handy.
- **Rigger:** This brush has very long, thin hairs that come to a precise point; it renders very fine, long lines.
- **Hake:** This wide, flat brush has a flat handle and is useful for laying down large washes.

Brush Care

- Don't let brushes rest bristle-down in water for any length of time.
- Rinse in cold water after use.
- Shake out excess water and shape with fingers; dry lying flat.
- Store brushes bristles-up in a jar.

Learn to Watercolor Paint on Different Papers

Watercolor paper comes in a variety of thicknesses and textures; good paper is made from 100-percent cotton rag, though some artists are fond of synthetic paper. Thickness is indicated by weight, given in grams per square meter (gsm) or pounds per ream (lb). Standard weights are 150 gsm/72 lb, 190 gsm/90 lb, 300 gsm/140 lb, 356 gsm/260 lb and 638 gsm/300 lb.

The characteristics of watercolor paper, such as whiteness and texture, differ by manufacturer; sampling the various watercolor papers and sketchbooks is recommended.

- **Cold-pressed paper** is pressed flat between felt sheets and has a distinct texture or tooth; it's the most versatile and popular paper.Dry-brush strokes on cold-pressed paper

- **Hot-pressed paper** is run through hot rollers that flatten the surface and create a smooth, finely grained texture with almost no tooth. It's less absorbent, so pigments look brighter on the surface. Dry-brush strokes on hot-pressed paper

- **Rough paper** is not pressed during manufacturing and has a prominent tooth that lets pigment particles settle in the indentations, creating a grainy texture.Dry-brush strokes on rough paper

- **Synthetic paper** is water-resistant, so it won't buckle. Made of polypropylene, it has an extremely smooth surface.Dry-brush strokes on synthetic paper

CHEMISTRY

Watercolor is made with finely ground pigments suspended in gum arabic, a water-soluble sap from the acacia tree, and may also contain small amounts of glycerine, glucose or formaldehyde. When the water evaporates, the gum arabic binds the pigment to the paper. Gouache, also called body color, has a composition similar to watercolor but with white pigment added to make it opaque.

Watercolors are very stable and unlikely to decay, but the pigments vary in permanence. The American Society for Testing and Materials (now ASTM International) rates the permanence of watercolors in three grades: I is permanent, with excellent lightfastness; II is very good lightfastness; III is impermanent and not lightfast; IV is poor lightfastness. Since each manufacturer's paint formulations differ, check the ASTM rating on the label.

Watercolor paints come highly concentrated in tubes or in small, dry blocks called

pans. Since the ratio of paint to binder is much lower than in oils and acrylics, the different qualities of the ground pigments are much more evident in the finished painting. Some watercolor paints are transparent, some opaque; some stain the paper, some don't; and some are granular; that is, the small particles settle in the depressions of paper, creating a distinct texture.

Safety and Cleanup

There are no dangerous solvents used with watercolor. Gum arabic is nontoxic; in fact, it's used in food and the lickable glue on envelopes. Watercolors clean up easily with mild soap and water.

As with the pigments used in oils and acrylics, those used in watercolors vary in toxicity. Any paint made with lead, cadmium, barium, chrome or zinc should be handled carefully to avoid accidental ingestion. Don't eat or drink when using the paints, and keep your hands and brushes out of your mouth.

MUST-HAVE TOOLS

- **Palette:** There are many different styles of palettes for watercolors, which at the minimum must be flat, white and impervious to water. The most popular are rectangular in shape with wells along the sides and a flat area for mixing in the center. (The palette shown below is a traveling palette.)
- **Water containers:** These must be unbreakable with wide mouths. Have at least two on hand—one for water to dilute the paint and one for washing the brushes while working.
- **Sponges:** Use a sponge to soak up excess water from brushes or to moisten the paper and create textures in wet paint.
- **Scrapers:** Manipulate paint on the paper with palette knives, a credit card or even the tips of brush handles.
- **Pencil:** This is for preliminary drawing.
- **Masking fluid and tape:** These let you preserve the white of the paper.
- **Towels and tissues:** Dry brushes and blot the paper with these.
- **Spray bottle:** Use a spritzer to keep paint from drying out on the palette and to create special effects when painting. (The spritzer pictured here is adequate for painting *en plein air*. A larger one is better for your studio.)

Watercolor Tools—palette, water containers, sponges, scrapers, masking fluid and tape, pencil, towels, tissues and spray bottle

WATERCOLOR TECHNIQUES

- **Washes:** The basic watercolor technique is the wash, an application of paint to produce a unified field of color. A wash is applied with a loaded brush in a series of even, horizontal strokes, each stroke barely overlapping the stroke above, pulling the paint downward. The wash can be graded by adding more or less water with each stroke.

Graded wash technique

- **Glazes:** A glaze is the application of paint over a dried layer so the underlying color shows through. Layers of diluted color can be applied to build up a controlled color transition.

Glazing technique

- **Wet-on-dry:** In wet-on-dry, a wet brush is used on dry paper. Wet-on-dry offers more control because the colors don't run together and the individual strokes are retained.

Wet-on-dry technique

- **Wet-into-wet:** In wet-into-wet, paint is applied to moist or damp paper, allowing the colors to run together in an unpredictable manner, creating soft edges and diffuse distributions of color.

Wet-into-wet technique

- **Dry-brush:** Dragging an almost dry brush with a small amount of paint over the surface of dry paper leaves deposits of paint on the bumps and ridges of the paper. It works best on rough paper.

Watercolor Tips

- Mix more paint than you think you need.
- Don't over mix the paint.
- Clean the threads of a paint tube before screwing the cap back on.
- Use the largest brush suitable for the purpose; small brushes encourage timidity and fussiness.
- Remember that watercolors lighten as they dry.

How do I avoid dull, muddy colors? One of the great attractions of watercolor is its clean, luminous color. To preserve this freshness, use clean water and brushes so you don't contaminate the colors on your palette. When mixing colors, try to use only two colors—three at the most. Don't over-mix the colors on the palette, and don't over-brush once it's on the paper. "Get in and get out" is my motto.

How do I get whites and highlights? If you plan right, the white of the paper can be preserved for light areas. Apply paint around the white areas or use a mask that can be removed when the paint dries. (Be aware that removing masking from damp paper may be difficult.) Once you apply color to the paper, it can be blotted with a dry brush, sponge or tissue while wet, or scrubbed with a brush when dry. You can also use white gouache to create highlights and white areas.

How can I avoid blooms? Blooms or backruns occur when one wash floods into another that hasn't dried completely. The movement displaces the previous deposit of pigments, creating an irregular "blossom." Some artists welcome these accidental qualities, but to prevent blooms, you must avoid touching a loaded brush to moist color.

Do I need to stretch watercolor paper before painting? Lightweight paper will buckle when wet unless it's stretched. Soak the paper in clean water for 10 to 15 minutes; then attach it to a flat board with tape, staples, tacks or glue and allow it to dry. The paper shrinks as it dries, creating tension across the surface. Cut the finished painting from the board. Many artists prefer to paint on heavier paper to avoid the effort of stretching it and to preserve the natural deckled edges.